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ABSTRACT

This monograph describes results of focus group interviews with 28 regular and special education teachers in Virginia concerning their experience with inclusion of students with disabilities in regular education classrooms. An introduction notes the trend toward greater inclusion of these students while providing needed special educational support services. Among teacher concerns were lack of a continuum of services, discipline policies, transition of inclusion services, and increasing teacher workload. Obstacles and barriers that teachers identified concerned teacher and parent resistance; lack of staff, training, funding, and administrative support; and class size and composition. Essential supports identified included administrative support, peer support, parent support, continuum of services, adequate staff, and staff development. Effective strategies were categorized as planning, classroom/behavior management, instruction, and assessment strategies. Participants also shared positive and negative effects of inclusion on both students and teachers and reported that the most common inservice was informal discussion among teachers. Teachers felt that preservice programs should require courses about special education and expose students to a variety of school-based experiences. Ten recommendations are offered, including developing a plan to win teacher and parent support, providing significant training, and celebrating successes. The interview protocol is appended. (DB)

Concerns About and Effective Strategies for Inclusion: Focus Group Interview Findings from Virginia Teachers

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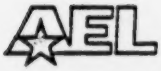

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AEL's mission is to link the knowledge from research with the wisdom from practice to improve teaching and learning. AEL serves as the Regional Educational Laboratory for Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. For these same four states, it operates both a Regional Technology Consortium and the Eisenhower Regional Consortium for Mathematics and Science Education. In addition, it serves as the Region IV Comprehensive Center and operates the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools.

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The Virginia Department of Education has provided the *Accept Learning Together: Integrating Students with Disabilities* resource and technical assistance to assist localities in developing and implementing integrated educational options for students with disabilities. Several school systems and individual schools have undertaken the restructuring of special education services to provide more inclusive or integrated educational settings. In recent years, issues relating to inclusion that affect regular and special education teachers have become topics of advisory committees, conferences, and information shared by the Virginia Education Association (VEA), the largest professional teachers organization in the state. It was to informed educators in these organizations that investigators in this study turned to assist with the identification of regular education and special education teachers who had one or more years of experience with inclusion. Special education staff of the Virginia Department of Education offered pertinent documents and were supportive of AEL's undertaking of the focus group interviews. VEA staff assisted in two ways—by nominating educators to participate and by announcing the opportunity for self-nomination to the focus groups to regular and special education teachers throughout the state. Through the cooperation of informed VEA staff and representatives from local divisions and from the Parent Education Advocacy and Training Committee, 66 educators were nominated to participate in one of four focus group interviews held in 1995. AEL appreciates the contributions of the following educators who nominated focus group participants:

Linda McKelvy Chik, Parent Education Advocacy and Training Committee

Marshall Leitch, Virginia Education Association

Theresa Rebhorn, Parent Education Advocacy and Training Committee

Helen Rolfe, Virginia Education Association

Marty Swaim, Virginia Education Association

Focus group interview locations were selected for their proximity to the educators identified for participation. AEL staff realize that not all educators with experience in inclusion were identified or informed and that many who were could not attend. AEL recognizes the time and effort devoted to sharing insights about inclusion by the following 28 experienced educators at the Fredericksburg (April 25, two sessions) and Blacksburg (April 26, two sessions) interviews:

Karen Armstead, Williamsburg-James City Schools

Minnie Brewbaker, Montgomery County Schools

La Nelle Brown, Arlington County Schools

Mary Carter, Petersburg City Schools

Gerry Collins, Arlington County Schools

Dana Dehart, Pulaski County Schools

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Lois Graham, Bedford County Schools

Reva Hansen, Montgomery County Schools

Ellen Harper, Williamsburg-James City Schools

Jack Hencke, Montgomery County Schools

Beth Heroux, Falls Church City Schools

Lisa Holland, Montgomery County Schools

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Caryl Williams, Arlington County Schools

INTRODUCTION

Since the passage of federal legislation (the Rehabilitation Act of 1973; the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, Public Law 94-142 in 1975; and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] in 1990), both special educators and regular educators have carefully examined the relationships between their programs and services to children. During this period, the emphasis in practice has shifted from mainstreaming (the selective placement of special education students in one or more "regular" education classes based upon the student's ability to "keep up" with the class) to inclusion (the commitment to educate each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school and classroom he or she would otherwise attend). In effect, inclusion involves bringing special education services to the child (as opposed to enrolling them in pull-out programs) and requiring only that the child benefit from a regular education placement rather than "keep up" with the class (Rogers, 1993). Throughout the years since the passage of IDEA, the interpretation of "least restrictive environment" has evolved in response to parent and child advocate pressures, increased research, and creation of technologies and methods for adaptive learning.

Several states, including all states in AEL's Region, have responded to federal mandates by creating policies, regulations, or guidelines to recommend progression toward inclusion for the education of special needs children. As these changes are carried out at the local level, some regular education teachers have experienced appropriate professional development, special educator or aide assistance in the classroom, caps on the size of classes enrolling special education students, and involvement in development of student Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and/or placement conferences conducted for their special education students.

But reform accompanied by support has not been the rule in all districts or schools. Many teachers have complained of the absence of these supports and have described "horror" stories of inappropriate placements and classroom disruptions after the introduction of special education students (Baines, L., Baines, C., and Masterson, C., 1994; Rogers, 1993; Virginia Education Association, 1993; West Virginia Federation of Teachers/AFT, 1994). While special educators also need assistance in developing collaborative working arrangements with others, regular or general educators (as they are sometimes referred to in the literature) who often have no or little training in special education, need information on strategies effective with special education students (West Virginia Federation of Teachers/AFT, 1994; Virginia Education Survey of Special Education Issues, 1993).

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

AEL's Classroom Instruction program has worked with and for teachers since 1985 to involve them in research and development efforts that build on current research and the wisdom of practice in "hot" topic areas. Inclusion has been such a "hot" topic since enactment of the initial federal legislation designed to provide a free and appropriate education for all children with disabilities (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, P.L. 94-142, 1975) was enacted, challenged in the courts, sustained, and reinforced through more recent legislation (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 1990; and the Americans with Disabilities Act [ADA], 1990).

The broad interpretation of IDEA's "least restrictive environment" has allowed children with disabilities, previously secluded into separate education programs staffed by specialists, to participate in the mainstream educational program and the everyday lives of Americans through accommodations such as handicapped access to buildings and transportation, instructional modifications for individual students, peer tutoring, etc.). Moving students with disabilities into regular classes as the first placement (with pull-out programs and additional assistance within the classroom provided "as needed") has changed instruction for these students, their teachers, and their classmates. This study sought to identify the problems/concerns and the effective strategies associated with inclusion that have been discovered by some regular and special educators experienced with inclusion in each state of AEL's Region (Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia). Since the study was a qualitative examination of teacher perceptions, focus group interviews were selected as an appropriate methodology.

Objectives for the study were as follows:

- Provide focus group interview opportunities for special and regular educators experienced with inclusion to express concerns about associated classroom problems and to share descriptions of strategies they have found effective;
- Increase teacher awareness of strategies effective for helping special education students in regular (general) education classes;
- Develop state summaries and a Regional summary of identified obstacles and strategies useful in helping special education students in regular classes.

Concerns about and Effective Strategies for Inclusion: Focus Group Interview Findings from Virginia Teachers reports the study procedures, results, conclusions, and recommendations developed from analysis of data from the four focus group interviews conducted by AEL in the state. For educators assisting teachers, the report provides an orientation to the concerns of

teachers who are experienced with inclusion. This document and, more particularly, its companion report *Teacher Perceptions of and Strategies for Inclusion: A Regional Summary of Focus Group Interview Findings*, provide numerous effective strategies contributed by focus group participants for use in readers' schools and classrooms. Finally, recommendations included in both reports can help administrators and teachers at every level in implementing inclusion as a systemic and beneficial process for all. **For further information on the study or to acquire summary reports from focus groups in other states of AEL's Region or additional resources on inclusion, contact the Distribution Center, AEL, P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325; 800/624-9120; or http://www.ael.org.**

STUDY PROCEDURES

AEL's Classroom Instruction program director, Jane Hange, contacted organizations with which AEL has traditionally collaborated who offered a state perspective on special education to request cooperation in the identification of teachers most experienced with inclusion who could discuss their concerns/questions and effective classroom strategies. In Virginia special education staff of the Virginia Department of Education supported the objectives of the study but referred AEL to others to identify participants. The Director of Instruction and Professional Development for the Virginia Education Association involved her organization's UniServ staff and local affiliate presidents in nominating participants and/or in sharing an announcement flyer with teachers. As a result of this approach, many teachers elected to participate and described their inclusion experience when they phoned to register. The Parent Education and Training Center (PEATC) involved in working with parents of special education children and special educators also nominated participants.

AEL staff sent invitations to the 64 regular and special educators who were nominated or volunteered to participate in interviews held April 25 in Fredericksburg or April 26 in Blacksburg, Virginia. When more than two educators were nominated from a school, nominees were asked to identify a regular educator and a special educator to represent their school. A total of 28 educators participated in the Fredericksburg (7 in a.m. session, 6 in p.m.) sessions and in the Blacksburg (10-a.m., 5-p.m.) sessions. A total of 16 sessions, including a field test of the interview questions, were held with 144 participants throughout the Region.

Each tape-recorded focus group interview involved discussion of 10 questions (see Interview Protocol, Appendix) and required approximately three hours. Greg Leopold of AEL's Planning, Research, and Evaluation staff and Jane Hange, alternately conducted interviews and assisted with field notes and facilitation. Round-trip mileage and a light lunch were provided as incentives. Also, teachers were invited to bring descriptions of strategies they found effective in assisting special education students. These strategies were discussed at the conclusion of each interview and all participants were mailed a compilation of the strategies from their session. Each participant, and those who recommended educators, will receive a copy of this report and the Regional summary of findings.

RESULTS

This section discusses the major findings from the Virginia focus group interviews. Each of the interview questions (see Appendix) is used as a heading to direct the reader's attention throughout the results. Conclusions and recommendations based on the data are offered in subsequent sections. Few differences were noted between responses of special educators and those of regular educators. Where important to the meaning of a statement, the role of the educator is noted.

Concerns

Focus group members identified several concerns that may impact the initiation and continued implementation of inclusion. These concerns included:

- lack of a continuum of services
- difficulty in meeting Individualized Education Plan (IEP) requirements
- discipline policies
- classroom aides
- transition between inclusion services across grade levels
- increasing need for special education services
- lack of communication with parents
- increasing teacher workload
- program credibility

Lack of a continuum of services. One teacher related that in her division (school district) only self-contained or inclusion classes were offered for special education students. There is a need, she explained, for a "bridging tool" for serving students who do not fit into either of these types of classes. Another teacher stressed the need for a variety of service approaches. She expressed the sentiment of several teachers when she commented, "Ninety-five percent of the students are best served by inclusion, but not all. My district is having trouble including emotionally disturbed students."

Difficulty in meeting IEP requirements. In schools where special education students are scheduled into several different classes, teachers described difficulties in meeting IEP requirements. If a special education teacher is working with several students, working with each student for the prescribed time on his/her IEP objectives may not be possible.

Discipline policies. Regular educators are concerned with the issue of classroom discipline for special education students. Special education students, most notably students with behavior disorders, may be extremely disruptive to the classroom. Participants reported that frequently these students are held to a different, more lenient standard than are students without disabilities. Teachers view these accommodations as having a negative effect on the behavior of the regular education students in their classes. In addition to modeling inappropriate behavior, regular education teachers stated that young children view the difference in treatment as unfair.

Classroom aides. Participants expressed concerns about the need to train classroom aides for appropriate roles in the classroom. In some schools, a major problem arises when an aide assumes primary responsibility for instruction in place of the special education teacher. This is more likely to occur when the number of teachers is inadequate. One teacher complained of having aides in the classroom instead of a special education teacher.

Another reported problem was an aide who focused too much attention on one child. The teacher commented, "If someone is in need, I'd like to have an aide help him or her. I don't like the aide hovering over one child. I don't think it's good for the child." Group members suggested that concern about classroom aides may be alleviated through training.

Transition of inclusion services. Teachers were concerned that special students who experience success in an included classroom will be greatly disappointed and disillusioned when they move to the higher grade levels where inclusion is not practiced. They suggested either implementing inclusion at all grade levels, or beginning implementation at the primary grades and expanding it as the students progress through the grades.

Increasing need for special services. Teachers described the growing numbers of special needs referrals that had resulted in pressure on teachers not to identify students. Because providing special education services can be costly, some teachers had been encouraged by administrators to keep the numbers down. A related issue was the increase in special education students as a result of families moving into the division because of its good reputation for service to special education students. One teacher commented on the number of parents moving to the area because of the division's inclusion policy. She stated, "The price of leadership is more students to serve."

Communicating with parents. A sensitive issue with teachers and some parents was lack of understanding about the legal requirements relating to the confidentiality of student information. Some teachers believed that information on special education students must be kept confidential from anyone except special educators and certain administrators. One teacher commented, "It's difficult to bring regular education parents in since you can't discuss specific confidential information concerning special education students."

Increasing teacher workload. One effect of implementing inclusion has been an increased workload for all collaborating teachers. Many teachers described being overburdened with paperwork and instructional responsibilities prior to inclusion. When working in an inclusive situation, students are spread over several classes, and frequently special education teachers must modify curriculum, instruction, and assessment for many students in cooperation with several teachers.

To some extent, classroom aides when not assigned to a specific student may also face a similar situation. Like teachers, aides may serve multiple students across several classes. This has the effect, in participants' opinions, of reducing their overall effectiveness.

Continuing need to establish credibility. Special education teachers spoke of the need to prove that inclusion is a workable and effective instructional approach. Proving the worth of inclusion may be a slow process involving education for teachers, administrators, parents and students. One participant related, "It took a year or more for me to smooth over the fears of the regular educator that these are not three-horned children."

Teachers of special education students expressed concerns about other teachers' perceptions of special education teachers. Traditionally, special education teachers have been viewed as ancillary to the regular program. As special educators become more visible in the school, it is important that they are viewed by teachers of students without disabilities as equals in the classroom and not merely support staff for the regular program. Special education teachers serving in several classrooms believed they are perceived as "teachers running ragged between classes" and find this image demoralizing and counterproductive.

Special education teachers reported that some regular education teachers believe that special education teachers advocate for special education children and not for other students. To respond to this challenge, one special education teacher stated, "There are not two separate worlds. Certain things have to be done to make an equal playing field (for all students). When regular education students ask for help, I find time to help them."

Obstacles

Focus group participants were asked to identify what they perceived to be obstacles or barriers to the successful implementation of inclusion in the schools. The obstacles they identified included:

- teacher resistance
- parent resistance
- lack of staff
- lack of training
- lack of administrative support
- class size and composition
- lack of adequate funding

Teacher resistance. Teacher resistance was viewed by many participants as a major obstacle to the implementation of an inclusion approach to serving special education students. Teachers tended to identify strongly with their classrooms and students, viewing the students they teach as "my students" and the classroom they teach in as "my classroom." Many feel threatened and insecure at the prospect of sharing their rooms and students with another teacher.

The situation can be compounded when collaborating teachers hold different perspectives of education and/or contrasting instructional paradigms. For example, regular education teachers are generally comfortable in large group instructional environments teaching predominantly homogeneous groups of students. Special educators, on the other hand, generally work in small group settings or one-on-one with students of a variety of ability levels. Thus, when teachers are forced to change their approach or participate as a partner in a setting in which they are not comfortable, they can become frustrated and resist the change.

Participants reported that teacher ownership issues and contrasting teaching styles or paradigms has, at times, resulted in the special educator assuming the role of instructional aide focusing his/ her efforts on the special education students in the class. In some schools, the special educator in effect withdrew from the class and allowed instruction to be conducted by a paraprofessional aide with the teacher acting as a consultant. A focus group member recommended, "Just as we place our kids, we have to place our teachers carefully."

In the experience of focus group members, the lack of teacher cooperation in an inclusive classroom is often aggravated by the failure to share information about students. This is particularly true when special educators are concerned about the legality of sharing confidential information about special education students. Regular education teachers may feel at a disadvantage and at times resentful of the unwillingness of their coteachers to provide information about students they are expected to serve.

Parent resistance. Participants reported that parents of both special education students and regular education students have been resistant to inclusion. Parents of students with special needs were described as afraid that their children were going to lose the individualized services they had been receiving in self-contained or resource classrooms. Similarly, parents of gifted students were concerned that their children would lose the challenging accelerated curriculum and instruction they were receiving. In one class, parents of gifted students complained so extensively that the decision was made not to include special education students the following year.

Lack of staff. Although more teachers are needed in many academic areas, Virginia teachers described the lack of qualified special education teachers as a major obstacle to the successful implementation of inclusion. An inclusion approach to special education may require more teachers than traditional self-contained or resource models of service. With special education students distributed across several classes, teachers may serve fewer students each day; however, many special education participants reported serving the same number of students and needing to collaborate with many other teachers.

Lack of training. One group member expressed concern over the lack of training "from the administration on down." She commented, "We're not doing our job properly if we go from self-contained to fully-included without training." With the proper training, teachers who lack the confidence to try new instructional approaches and address the needs of special students can become more self-assured and less resistant to having special education students in their classrooms. Unfortunately, focus group participants reported a lack of interest in voluntary training for staff in one school division. Few teachers made an effort to attend sessions on special education and inclusion when other concurrent sessions were offered.

Participants also expressed concerns about the lack of training for parents. One teacher stressed the need for preparing parents of students without disabilities before beginning inclusion. When parents understood the concepts of an inclusion classroom and had knowledge of the benefits of the model, they were less fearful and resistant.

Lack of administrative support. While few participants identified a lack of principal support, it was viewed as a potential obstacle. Principals exert a major influence on the school staff and can make or break a program. In schools with strong administrator support, inclusion was described as successful.

It was also pointed out that administrators can be overly supportive of inclusion to the extent that a full continuum of services for special education students is not provided. For example, according to one teacher, "The administration believes inclusion can work for every child and there are some students that are not suited to it."

Class size/class composition. Teachers concurred about the need for smaller class sizes. Class sizes were described as frequently too large before special education students were included. When many students or students with disabilities are included in the class, the impact can negatively influence instruction. For example, a teacher commented, "Too often there are 33 fifth graders with 8 special education students; it doesn't work."

Lack of funds. Several of the major obstacles discussed by group participants may be alleviated in part by adequate funding. Many group members acknowledged that, although all programs need money, inclusion with its high per pupil cost requires substantially greater funding than traditional special education approaches. One teacher expressed frustration when she said, some administrators have "the impression that inclusion should save them money, and it's hard to convince them otherwise."

Essential Supports

Focus group members identified several factors which they considered to be essential for inclusion to be successful. These factors, which address the obstacles and concerns previously described, include:

- administrative support
- peer support
- parent support
- continuum of services
- adequate staff
- staff development

Administrative support. Participants described the support of central office administrators as necessary to make inclusion work. Central office staff demonstrated their support by talking with parents, visiting classrooms, and allocating funds for inclusion. Teachers were quick to point out that a supportive principal is another key to the success of the inclusion model. Not only must the principal support the approach, but this support must be visible to the school staff, students, and parents. Principals demonstrate support by providing planning time for teachers, keeping the class size and ratio of special education to regular education students reasonable, facilitating staff development, and providing rewards and incentives to teachers who make inclusion work. In one school, teachers were empowered to participate in the selection of new staff. They reported being involved in the interview process where they asked each applicant their views on inclusion. In another school the principal kept a classroom free to be used as a training room or "emergency room" for disruptive students.

Peer support: collaborative environment. In the views of interview participants, the most critical factor in the success of inclusion is the relationship that exists between collaborating teachers. Teachers who successfully implemented inclusion respected each other's opinions and expertise in working with both regular education students and special education students. These teachers tended to view students as "our students" and willingly shared classroom responsibilities. Many focus group members described their own supportive environments. In schools where good collaboration existed, regular and special education teachers worked in teams and met regularly to solve problems and to discuss students. These teachers were willing to relieve or fill in for one another and could be found working together across grade levels. One teacher related how she and her teaching partner jointly completed report cards. Another teacher characterized her situation by saying, "This co-teaching thing is kind of like a marriage."

Parent support. Gaining the support of parents is extremely important to the success of inclusion. The support of parents may be "more emotional" than anything else, but is important in providing teachers with the confidence to attempt the inclusion approach. Participants stated that most often after parents of children with disabilities had knowledge of the benefits of inclusion, they favored the practice. Selling the value of inclusion to parents of non-disabled children was described as more difficult.

Continuum of services. Offering a continuum of services, from self-contained to full inclusion, was described as relieving a great deal of pressure on teachers. One of the greatest fears expressed by regular education teachers was the potential disruptive influence of special education children on other students. When full- and parttime options were available for students unable to function in the regular class, teachers were more willing to participate in inclusion.

Personnel. Several focus group members explained the need for more special educators in their schools. Because special education services were so thinly distributed across classes, one participant recommended hiring or training "inclusion specialists" to advise regular education teachers. Although such specialists would not supplant the need for more special education teachers, they could help guide the efforts of other teachers who are struggling with inclusion.

Teachers expressed an appreciation for the assistance provided by instructional aides. Qualified aides in the classroom are a valuable resource. As helpful as classroom aides are, group participants pointed out that it is important that aides receive training in working in an inclusive setting and that the school administrators hire aides to support, but not to take the place of teachers.

Staff development. Inservice training was advocated by all group members as a necessary support to inclusion. Training is the major vehicle for informing staff, administrators, and parents about the nature of inclusion and how to best serve all students in an inclusive setting. Teachers recognized a need for training in almost every component of implementing the inclusion model, and yet, found it to be one of the greatest unmet needs in their divisions (districts).

Effective Strategies

Several effective strategies for working in an inclusive setting were offered by focus group members. The strategies are categorized as planning, classroom/behavior management, instruction, and assessment strategies.

Planning. Collaborative planning was identified as an essential strategy for successful inclusion. One participant described bi-weekly inclusion meetings held in her school that were attended by teachers and all related service professionals. These meetings were extremely valuable in providing opportunities to discuss the needs of special education students and to collectively develop intervention strategies. Another teacher commented positively on the effectiveness of team planning at her school, which provided teachers the opportunity to collaborate on a regular basis.

Classroom/behavior management. A major concern of inclusion teachers was the behavior and social skills of special education students in the regular classroom. Group participants shared various measures to ensure that special education students were minimally disruptive while learning appropriate classroom behavior.

Peer counseling or whole group problem solving was described as a primary method for improving the socialization skills of special education students. At one school, behavior

problems were considered a class concern and dealt with using a peer counseling model. A teacher explained the approach saying, "Students talk as a class, as a community, not just for special education students." Class members described problems, discussed potential solutions, and decided on a strategies they thought would work. Students at another school were given similar opportunities to discuss class problems, including inappropriate behavior with or without the problem student present.

A variation of the peer counseling approach involved assigning a "big brother," usually from a higher grade, to each special needs student. It was the responsibility of the peer counselor to check with the student during each day to find out how the day was going. If necessary, the "big brother" spent time with the student (e.g., walked around the football field). This approach to peer counseling helped socialize students and provided them with a positive role model.

One teacher described a more traditional means of working with a student with behavior problems. In this case, the special education teacher assumed the responsibility of working with the child one-on-one to modify behavior.

The most structured strategy offered by focus group members for modifying student behavior was a "time-out room." At this school, a room was continuously available for students who were having difficulty in class. The room was staffed with an aide as a means of monitoring the student and providing the necessary support until the student could return to his/her class.

Instruction. Several instructional strategies were described by focus group participants as effective in inclusive classes. They included:

- adopting multiage primary groups (K-3) which adds a fourth teacher to the class enabling the special education teacher to work with all students
- small heterogenous group work at learning centers with teachers and aides rotating to each center to assist all students
- teachers and aides rotating among students in the regular class with both working with all students
- assigning a "class note taker for students who need to listen but then take the notes home" or having someone take notes on an overhead projector while the teacher lectures
- study guides prepared by the special education teacher for all students and used by the regular education teacher to develop tests

- relating information to student interests
- a resource room open to all students
- providing special education students with special-needs choices for assignments.
- peer assistance in which Learning Disabled students can find answers and have their regular education partners write them down
- the use of technology, such as using a keyboard to help develop fine motor skills or using specialized communication aids for nonverbal students
- teaching students study skills such as the use of mnemonic devices
- writing key words on chalkboard
- planning instruction for a variety of learning styles
- standing next to a student to repeat phrases
- holding spelling/reading contests
- oral reading
- clueing
- illustrations completed by student pairs with labeling by special education students
- having each student choose spelling words from a novel which become the master spelling list
- notebooks for each subject developed by the inclusion aide which provide all chapters on audiotape and a complete study guide for each subject

Assessment. Teachers reported using a variety of alternative assessments to judge student progress, communicate with parents, and reward students for their efforts. Alternative assessments described by focus group members included:

- assessing students on projects, pictures, and small writing assignments

- developing student profiles
- providing "go home" journals
- keeping anecdotal records
- awarding sticky labels in daily notes kept in student notebooks
- allowing special education students to take quizzes as part of the large group but grading only a sample of their responses
- giving credit for participation
- audiotaping quizzes

Effects of Inclusion on Classroom Climate

Positive impact on students. Most focus group interview participants were advocates for the inclusion model. They identified several positive effects of the approach for teachers and students without disabilities, as well as for students with special needs.

Regular education students were described as most often very accepting of their special education peers. One teacher commented, "It's a very natural environment. Students accept handicaps." Other teachers confirmed this perception. One added, "My other children are becoming advocates."

A major effect of the inclusion of special education students in classrooms was the opportunity provided for regular education students to become aware of, and gain an appreciation for, people different from themselves. In at least one class, this understanding was generalized beyond students with disabilities. This effect was explained by a group member who explained, "Our school is sheltered regarding minorities. Some of our most bigoted students have grown to care so much about students with special needs that they've opened up to minority students." Another teacher said of her students, "They've outgrown their parents in a lot of ways." In this way, both regular and special education students were said to benefit from inclusion.

The impact of inclusion on special education students appeared to be substantial. Teachers related that, "Special education students work so much harder in regular classroom" and "My special education kids are asking intellectual questions".

Teachers witnessed significant growth for special education students in areas other than academics. In the eyes of focus group members, inclusion has "greatly enhanced the self-esteem of these students." In one teacher's opinion, the students developed a sense of "self advocacy" and were more willing to speak out for themselves and what they need.

Participants reported that not only do special education students experience success more frequently in the regular class, but the stigma associated with special education is reduced as the special education teacher works with regular education students as well as those with special needs. However, one teacher was concerned about the negative effects resulting from the tendency to "hide the labels" in an inclusive setting. It may, in her opinion, downplay the needs these students have.

According to one group participant, an added benefit of inclusion is that by socializing with non-disabled peers, "special education students see that regular education students get into trouble, too." The sum effect of the approach seems to be a greater understanding about each other on the part of both groups of students.

Perhaps the positive social effects of inclusion were most evident in classes which included the broadest range of abilities. One teacher commented how inclusion has "given gifted and talented students an appreciation for how other students learn." In fact, teachers reported a "significant number of helping behaviors by gifted and talented and regular students."

Finally, teachers credited inclusion with providing opportunities to identify marginal students or students with special needs that might have gone un-noticed. Special and regular education teachers working as partners in a classroom were more likely to become aware of students who would benefit from additional attention.

Positive impact on teachers. Students are not the sole beneficiaries of inclusion according to focus group members. Adults in the classroom have also benefitted in several ways.

Teachers reported soon learning to raise their expectations for capabilities of special education students. Many of the low expectations mistakenly held for these students were broken down. One teacher related how, after a short time, she observed what special education students are capable of and raised her expectations for them in the classroom.

Teachers also benefitted instructionally. Regular education teachers learned instructional strategies that have been successful with special education students, and are appropriate for all students. Teachers frequently adopted these strategies for the entire class, which helped marginally achieving students. In effect, inclusion forced these teachers and students to learn about a range of abilities and instructional strategies.

Inclusion also appeared to have a positive impact on teacher self esteem. Regular education teachers described gaining confidence as they discovered they are capable of working with special education students, Similarly, special education teachers learned that they are capable of teaching regular students in a large group setting. Both groups of teachers gained an appreciation of each other's skills and expertise.

To some teachers such professional growth has not been painless. As one teacher commented, "Teachers have to teach to all different levels in elementary, middle, and high school. Teachers have had a rude awakening to learn this." They have had to adapt curriculum to all levels and to hold different but high expectations for individual students.

Negative impact. Not all of the classroom effects of inclusion were positive. The most often mentioned negative effect was related to the disruptive behavior of special education students. Teachers described the "chaos" that resulted when special students were included without advance preparation in the class. A special educator explained that in her school classroom disruption increases when "our kids get into basic classes which are notorious for misbehavior." Participants agreed that emotionally disturbed children were difficult to handle in any class. One teacher commented that the volatility of some students with behavior disorders had increased in severity in the regular education classroom.

A quite different scenario was described by a teacher who related that in her class, "Inclusion has had a reverse effect. Some regular education students say what special education students do is a lot of fun. Those regular education students have wanted to work with the special education teacher." These comments reveal that strategies helpful to special education students may also be effective teaching strategies for all students.

One focus group member suggested that perhaps inclusion has not had the effect of eliminating group distinctions, but in fact, has created a third class of students. The teacher, speaking of marginal performers who had not been identified for special services, stated, "We have students in our schools without labels and they're beginning to feel left out. Are we functioning as a class or as separate classes?" Another teacher appeared to support this idea, saying, "In inclusion we seem to be hiding the labels. We have to come to some agreement—is advocacy the way we want to go, or is inclusion?"

Helpful Inservice

Focus group participants agreed that inservice training is vital for the success of inclusion. They were somewhat discouraged, however, by the lack of available training and lack of interest in special education training on the part of middle- and high-school faculties. One teacher described much of the inservice training provided by the division (district) as the "knee

jerk" variety. Another teacher described the attitude of central office administrators as, "You're not teaching if you're not in the classroom. We don't pay you to go to conferences." A third participant added, "If the principal doesn't buy in, it doesn't make a difference what the inservice is."

The primary means of inservice training in the schools represented in the focus groups was informal discussion among teachers. One regular education teacher stated that the best training she received was from her coteacher. A second participant commented, "We inservice each other everyday," and a third added, "Any training teachers are getting they're getting themselves or doing for each other."

Training activities included sharing materials among colleagues, shadowing special education teachers, explaining class activities to visitors, visiting inclusion classes in other schools, and videotaping teachers with students to learn from observation.

Traditional means of teacher training included workshop or staff development sessions. In one division (district), the inclusion teachers formed a panel for other teachers. In another division, teachers taught teachers writing and classroom management at a division staff development workshop. Less structured methods of training included training by satellite, video tapes, and inclusion conferences provided by the Virginia Education Association (VEA). The VEA also sponsored a summer leadership conference that some focus group interview participants found useful.

Teachers identified several topics which they found useful for inclusion inservice. These topics included: whole language, classroom management, writing, cooperative learning, sign language, team building, communication, group dynamics, portfolio assessment, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), alternative assessment, and task analysis.

Among the formal training packages recommended by group members were: *The Quality School* (William Glasser), VQUEST, ROPES, *Success in Reading and Writing*, *Math Their Way*, and the videotape *Educating Peter*.

Proposals for inservice training included having regular education teachers spend a week in a self-contained class. Likewise, it was suggested that special educators should experience the solo teaching of a regular education class. And finally, all teachers should take time to observe what occurs in vocational classes.

Preservice Training

Focus group members suggested that preservice programs should require courses about special education including inclusion, hygiene for students with special needs, administering medications, and behavior management. Courses should also address topics such as learning styles, teaming, the wise use of planning time, organizational skills, and professional responsibilities. In addition to being taught about how to recognize individual differences, participants suggested that preservice teachers should be taught how to deal with different student behaviors.

In addition to academic knowledge, teacher education students should be exposed to a variety of school-based experiences. Field experiences should become a part of the education program where preservice students would observe a variety of classrooms, including self-contained and inclusive models. According to one focus group member, student teaching for all education majors should be extended with the provision that part of the time would be spent in an inclusive classroom. Student teaching, according to one participant, "should be the best class with commensurate pay."

If preservice teachers are to be adequately prepared for the rigors of the classroom, faculty at the colleges of education need to revise their training paradigms. The traditional master teacher model was not viewed as appropriate for new teachers expected to work in an inclusion program. "Get the professors into the classrooms," commented one teacher. College professors need refresher training to update their knowledge and gain a realistic perspective of what is happening in the schools. The increased use of classroom teachers as adjunct faculty was also proposed.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The implementation of an inclusion approach to providing special education services impacts the entire school community. Changes required when inclusion is initiated in a school is likely to initially cause discomfort for all parties. Focus group participants identified what they had experienced as obstacles to the successful implementation of inclusion in their schools. The most significant obstacles were teacher and parent resistance to inclusion, lack of administrative support, lack of training, large class enrollments, a high ratio of special education students to regular education students, and a lack of adequate funds.

Group members discussed concerns they viewed as influencing the continuation or expansion of inclusion in their schools. Their concerns included:

- the lack of a continuum of services from self-contained to fully-inclusive classes
- difficulty in meeting IEP requirements
- current discipline policies that appear to set unequal standards
- the appropriate training and use of classroom aides
- implementing inclusion across all grades
- the increasing need for special education services
- perceived legal issues in communicating with parents
- the increasing teacher workload
- the need to establish the credibility of inclusion as a viable model

The majority of teachers credited inclusion for having a positive impact on their classroom. Teachers related how the self-esteem of included students improved greatly, while regular education students also grew in their understanding and acceptance of individual differences. Teachers benefitted from learning new instructional techniques and were better able to serve borderline students. Teachers expressed some frustration over the disruptions caused by special education students with behavior disorders.

When asked about strategies that they found to be valuable in an inclusive classroom, teachers identified modifications to the following: planning, classroom management, instructional strategies and assessment. Examples of effective strategies included:

- Planning—bi-weekly inclusion meetings attended by teachers and related service professionals
- Management—peer counseling, "time-out" room
- Instruction—multiage primary groups (k-3), small group work, teacher rotation among students, assigning a "class note taker," study guides prepared by the special education teacher, a resource room available to all students, peer assistance, assistive technology
- Assessment—assessing students on projects, pictures, small writing assignments, anecdotal records, credit for participation, taping quizzes, oral testing.

Group participants recognized the need for training prior to and during the implementation of inclusion in a school. Most training described had taken place on an informal basis as teachers worked with their colleagues. Teachers regularly shared materials and instructional modifications, shadowed special education teachers, hosted visitors, visited other schools, and videotaped students.

Formal training was sparse and, when made voluntary, not well attended. However, some teachers had taken advantage of training by satellite, professional videotapes, and inclusion conferences, when funds were available. Local inservice was offered on whole language, classroom management, writing, cooperative learning, sign language, team building, communication, group dynamics, portfolio assessment, ADHD, alternative assessment, and task analysis.

Teachers expressed a need for a focus on inclusion in teacher-training programs. They suggested that preservice programs at colleges and universities be revised to reflect the current inclusion approaches such as collaboration, teaming, modification of curriculum, instructional strategies, and alternative assessment. They also proposed an increased number and longer duration of field experiences.

All of the teachers participating in the focus groups have witnessed student success and failures in inclusive settings. Generally, they reported that students were most successful when they had support from home and their peers in the classroom. Many students who made gains were developmentally delayed in social or communication skills. Less successful, according to

participants, were students who did not have adequate support from family or who experienced severe emotional or behavior disorders.

In sum, focus group members were advocates for the inclusion model of serving special education students. However, they viewed inclusion as "one more choice in a continuum of services. It's not the answer to everything."

Recommendations

The following recommendations were derived from information provided by focus group members. To ensure that inclusion is successful in the schools:

Demonstrate administrator commitment at the central office and school level. The catalyst for implementing inclusion in a division (district) should come from the administration. By demonstrating a belief in the inclusion approach to special education, the superintendent and school principals can help dispel the fears of parents and reduce teacher resistance.

Develop a plan to win teacher and parent support. In conjunction with administrative support, those individuals in charge of the implementation effort should take great care in developing a plan to address the concerns of faculty and parents. The most common means described to reassure parents was extensive communication and education. Providing information through school meetings, newsletters, and commercial media are practical means of reaching parents.

Provide significant training. Participants recommend training about the instructional strategies, curricular modifications, teaming, collaboration, issues related to confidentiality of student information, and discipline policies. Teachers and aides also need guidance about the appropriate role and responsibilities of classroom aides.

Provide adequate funding. Adequate funding for inclusion could greatly reduce or eliminate many of the obstacles and concerns discussed by focus group participants. Funds were deemed necessary for training, increased staff, and materials. Providing financial support was described as an effective means of demonstrating administrative support for inclusion.

Maintain reasonable class enrollments and a balance of special education students and regular education students. One of the most perplexing problems for participants involved was the scheduling of special education students into regular classrooms. Some participants recommended that the ratio of special education students to regular students

should not be program based, but rather based on the instructional needs of a particular group. The number of special education students considered reasonable should depend, in part, on the type and severity of the students' disabilities.

Provide for a continuum of services from self-contained to fully-inclusive instructional settings. No one model of instruction is appropriate for all students. The majority of special education students may be well served in a regular classroom, but some will need alternate learning environments. Just as curriculum and instruction is modified on an individual basis, so should be the instructional setting. Therefore, provisions for self-contained classes, as well as resource services should be available according to focus group participants.

Provide an adequate number of teachers. As the number of students qualifying for special education services increases, there is a corresponding need for additional teachers and instructional aides. Additionally, with the implementation of inclusion, teachers are reporting an increasing number of marginally successful students who are in need of services.

Plan for implementing inclusion across all grades levels. To provide special education students with a consistently supportive environment throughout their school careers, it maybe necessary to either implement inclusion at all grades simultaneously or to develop plans to expand inclusion to each grade level as students progress.

Celebrate successes. To garner support for inclusion as a viable instructional approach, communicate to parents, teachers, and administrators when students are successful.

Advocate for updated preservice preparation programs. Teacher-training programs at colleges and universities should reflect current trends in special and regular education. Training areas participants would add include: collaboration, teaming, modification of curriculum and instruction, and alternative assessment, as well as participation in extensive and varied field experiences.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A

INCLUSION FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction

Good morning/afternoon! My name is _____ and assisting me is _____. Our task today is to talk with you about your experiences with inclusion. The purpose of our discussion is twofold: 1) to identify teacher concerns regarding inclusion; and 2) to compile strategies teachers have found effective for helping special needs children in regular classes. We would like for you to speak honestly and candidly with respect to the questions I will pose to you.

Before we begin, I need to establish a few ground rules. First, our discussion will be tape recorded because I will not be taking notes during our discussion and may later want to recall something said. Because of the recording, please speak clearly and I'll try to encourage only one speaker at a time. Also, _____ will be taking notes as we talk so that in the event the tape recorder malfunctions, she/he can help me remember what was said. Everything that you tell us will remain anonymous and will only be used in summary form. Specific names of schools and other students, teachers, or parents will not be used. If you need clarification of the question, please feel free to ask.

While time is short today, it is important that everyone has an opportunity to express their concerns and share their experiences. It will be my job to insure that everyone who has something to say has that opportunity. There are not right or wrong answers. No one in the group, including me, is to be considered the expert on anything that we talk about. Therefore, please do not judge one another's opinions; everyone's opinion is equally important.

Finally, we will take a brief formal break about midway through the morning/afternoon, but please feel free to use the restroom or take a brief stretch if you need to do so as quietly as you can.

With those guidelines in mind, let's begin!

1. First, please introduce yourself and briefly describe your experience with inclusion.

2. Please describe your concerns about inclusion.

3. As you began your experience with inclusion, what obstacles or barriers did you confront and what solutions did you create to address them? (Probe for: in the school, at the district level, with families, with colleagues, with students, or others)

4. What support has been most helpful in implementing inclusion?

5. Within the regular education classroom, which strategies or practices have seemed most effective with special needs students?

6. What effect does having a special needs child have on classroom climate and other students in a regular classroom?

7. What inservice training has been most helpful to you as you include special needs students in the regular classroom?

8. If you were making recommendations for teacher preparation in inclusion for regular (general) and special education teachers, what would you most strongly recommend?

9. Think of one special needs student with whom you work who has made great gains. Briefly characterize for us, if you would, his/her greatest problems in the classroom and the ways you and the student have overcome them.

10. Think of one special needs student with whom you work who has not made great gains. Briefly characterize for us, if you would, his/her greatest problems in the classroom and the ways you and the student have tried to overcome them.

11. Are there other things that you would like to tell us or things we forgot to ask about?

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